DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 640 CE 076 890

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TITLE	Service Learning: More than Community Service. ERIC Digest No. 198.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CE-98-198
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002001
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Career Development; *Career Education; *Education Work Relationship; *Educational Benefits; *Educational Objectives; Educational Principles; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Postsecondary Education; Public Service; Role of Education; *Service Learning; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Service learning contextualizes student learning and provides an environment in which students can acquire organizational, team, problem-solving, and other skills and attitudes necessary for future work and learning. Although service learning has been classified as a form of work-based learning, students participating in service learning receive no financial reward. Like school-to-work efforts, service learning connects students to their communities through work force participation, promotes a learning approach through which students apply academic and vocational skills and knowledge to real life/work situations, and is based on the belief that students learn best when actively engaged in the learning process. Besides expanding students' knowledge and skills for employment, service learning also offers personal benefits for students, including increased self-confidence, competence, and empathy for others. When integrated with community development, service learning has the potential of awakening student interest in community issues. It offers teachers an opportunity to implement educational reform strategies emphasizing student-centered contextual learning, and it affords teachers a way to teach values, morals, and ethics. Service learning is not just for elementary and secondary students; for example, the University of Louisville is piloting a service learning program for professional development of preservice teachers. (Contains 14 references) (MN)

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CE 076 670

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DIGEST NO. 198

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Bettina Lankard Brown

1998

EDO-CE-98-198

Service Learning: More than Community Service

Service learning, like apprenticeship and school-to-work, contextualizes student learning. It provides an environment in which students can acquire organizational, team, problem-solving, and other skills, attitudes, and capabilities necessary for future work and learning. This *ERIC Digest* looks at service learning: what it is and how it supports vocational and career development outcomes.

A Complement to School-to-Work and Other Federal Initiatives

Service learning is a work-based learning experience through which students learn, develop, and apply academic and vocational skills to address the real life needs of their local communities (Briscoe et al. 1996). It is a structured school-based experience of voluntary community service that stresses personal reflection about the service experience, and it is most often sponsored by schools, churches, youth organizations, and other such community groups (Hudson River Center for Program Development 1996).

Service learning has been classified as a form of work-based learning because it provides students with work-like experiences. It differs from school-based learning in that it actively engages students in producing goods or services, not in just learning about work or work-related issues (Hamilton and Hamilton 1997). It differs from school-to-work transition programs in that students receive no financial reward (Silcox 1995). However, because it integrates classroom learning with community service projects, service learning shares a commitment to the same outcomes as school-to-work (National School-to-Work Opportunities Office 1996).

Service learning and school-to-work efforts are both designed to connect students to their communities—service learning through community service and school-to-work, through work force participation. Both promote a learning approach through which students apply academic and vocational skills and knowledge to address real life/work situations, while developing the attitudes, values, and behaviors that will lead them to become informed citizens and productive workers (Briscoe et al. 1996).

Another connecting element between service learning and school-to-work is the belief that students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process. This belief reflects the constructivist theory of learning, which contends that knowledge is constructed as people draw upon their prior knowledge and experiences to process, interpret, and negotiate the meaning of new information within the social context of their environments. GOALS 2000: Educate America Act, and the National and Community Service Trust Act are several national initiatives supporting stronger connections between service learning and school-to-work as a strategy for educational reform (Gomez 1996). Curriculum transformation, authentic instruction, new settings for learning (e.g., work site), and the addition of community partners and community development activities are some of the key outcomes to be realized by combining school-to-work and service-learning (ibid.).

Expanding Students' Knowledge and Skills for Employment

"Service learning is not a program of charitable endeavors, where one party is the giver and the other the taker. In service learning, learning can be defined as the accomplishments of tasks which meet human need in combination with conscious educational growth" (Franta 1994, p. 132). Thus, although community service is often provided on a voluntary basis, it does not qualify as service learning unless it affords active learning through workplace experience and reflection. Reflection is as essential as experience in service learning. It provides students an opportunity to think about and interpret their experiences in the community and to share their new knowledge and understandings with each other, noting ways in which their experiences were meaningful to them as well as to others (National School-to-Work Opportunities Office 1996).

Self-confidence, competence, and empathy for others are some of the personal benefits students realize through service learning. Additionally, by engaging in problem solving and by working cooperatively and collaboratively with others, students are able to build skills needed for employment in today's workplace.

"Service learning is a perfect example of what Dewey describes as an educational experience, i.e., it involves activities that are interesting and awaken curiosity in students, that involve experiences that allow development over time, and that are intrinsically important" (Eyler et al. 1997, p. 3). It engages students in the solution of the authentic problems of the community, engaging them in critical analysis and reflection as a means of developing in them a greater understanding of issues within their situational context (ibid.).

A Link to Career Pathways and Career Development

Service learning, when integrated with community development, has the potential of awakening student interest in community issues (Israel and Hoover 1996). It exposes students to the challenge of working with people from different backgrounds, cultures, and ages; it prompts them to work under time constraints and to be aware of life issues; and it leads them to address problems the solutions of which are beyond reach. It also connects students to their local communities, forging bonds between them, their schools, and community organizations (Checkoway 1996). Service learning experiences that "complement course work in academic disciplines can also provide field training for public health, social work, urban planning, and other professions" (ibid., p. 600).

Service learning also fosters preemployment skills and job readiness, and, as such, is an excellent focus for vocational education. Silcox (1995) contends that "vocational education should prepare students with a business/community-based approach, particular in view of the current emphasis on outcome-based education, which favors apprenticeship models over classroom models" (p. 24). Through placements in public and private, profit and nonprofit sectors of the business community, students are positioned to realize many of the goals of apprenticeship work (ibid.)

A New Way of Connecting Students to School

Service learning offers teachers an opportunity to implement educational reform strategies that emphasize student-centered contextual learning—learning that occurs through students' interpretative interactions in the social environments in which their knowledge is to be applied. It affords a way to help all teachers—including those in middle school—teach values, morals, and ethics

and to help students develop a sense of self-worth and a connectedness with school (Hope 1997). In a study reported by McPherson (1997), service learning is "associated with greater student engagement with schools, better attitudes towards schools, better attendance, fewer disciplinary actions, and fewer behavior problems" (p. 11). As such, it offers the potential of reaching at-risk youth, especially when introduced in the adolescent development years, before these students are prone to drop out (Silcox 1995).

Service learning requires that considerable attention be devoted to the training of academic and vocational teachers. "Staff development for teachers should be centered around acquiring a knowledge base of the principles of service learning to include site visitations to successful programs. In addition, the skills required to design appropriate curriculum and learning activities need to be developed. Curriculum development must involve integrating service learning activities into the classroom portion of the program. Examples include team building, communication, conflict resolution, problem solving and project completion" (Hudson River Center for Program Development 1996, p. 70).

Service learning is not only for the elementary or secondary student. The University of Louisville is piloting a service learning program for the professional development of preservice teachers that involves them in performing community service in the local area. Goins (1996) reported that the "teachers who worked with special programs for at-risk kids or with the homeless shelters were exposed, many for the first time, to families in poverty and crisis and for whom education was not a priority" (p. 125). Such experiences helped the teachers become more aware of the problems that many of their students face in their personal, out-of-school lives while also providing worthwhile service.

Summary

Social inequalities are a major issue facing the nation today. The service learning movement offers one strategy for sustaining democracy and economic opportunity by involving young people in addressing the problems of their communities. Til (1997) discusses the elements of the PECTS system to describe the types of insights students may gain through a service learning experience:

- P = politics (how people make decisions about community problems)
- E = economy (how people work to make a living)
- C = culture (how language, ethnic identity, religion, families, schools, churches, and neighborhoods influence how people make meaning of their lives)
- TS = third sector—voluntary or nonprofit (how people join together for fellowship or to address a common cause)

Service learning gives students, teachers, parents, and community members an opportunity to work together to construct solutions to real problems and answer questions relevant to PECTS. It engages all learners in the construction of knowledge as they share information about their unique experiences, cultures, backgrounds, and perceptions in relation to the real worlds in which they live.

As students work through the unstructured problems exemplified in real life, they have the opportunity to improve their capacity for critical thinking and problem solving, and they become more able to engage in career planning and progression. For example, one preservice teacher engaged in the University of Louisville service learning program decided to "obtain additional certification in learning disabilities largely because of the success and fulfillment he enjoyed as a result of tutoring middle school students diagnosed with learning and behavioral disorders" (Goins 1996, p. 127). Because community service learning affords students an opportunity to establish a network of contacts they can draw upon as they pursue future career opportunities and experiences, service learning is a significant part of vocational and career education.

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